HUMAN NATURE AND HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

HUME, HEGEL AND VICO

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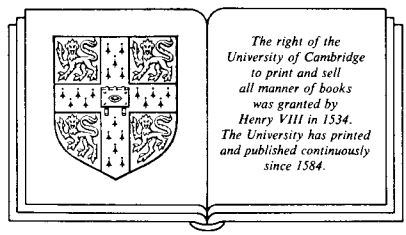

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INTRODUCTION

This study has two aims. The first is to offer an account of the minimal presuppositions of historical knowledge from the point of view of a particular possibility. There are many accounts of the conditions of historical knowledge available. Most of them accept, either explicitly or implicitly, that these conditions must include some general assumptions about human nature, which serve to provide historical knowledge both with a certain kind of intelligibility and with a general support for the kinds of reasoning upon which it is normally thought to depend. They thus support but, at the same time, constrain the kind of knowledge which historians can provide. It must be at least a conceptual possibility, however, that human nature itself may have changed, to a greater or lesser extent, over time. It would seem unreasonable, therefore, to pre-empt the decision whether this possibility has or has not actually occurred, simply through adopting certain limiting assumptions about human nature as a condition of historical knowledge. Whether or not, or to what degree, such changes have actually occurred ought to be a factual matter rather than one the answer to which follows from methodological considerations alone. One aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate the problem whether an account of the presuppositions of historical knowledge can be reached which will allow it to be a factual matter whether, and to what degree, human nature may have changed in the course of its history.

The second aim of the study is to offer a critical interpretation of the theories of three important philosophers which have definite implications for the first problem and, by an analysis of the difficulties which these raise, to help to clarify the problem and to see how it may

be resolved. It will be seen from the list of chapter headings that I have devoted much more space to this task than to the first. The reason for this is that, although the thought of these three philosophers is directly relevant to the main issue, they did not themselves write with this problem alone in mind. In approaching their thought from the point of view of its bearing upon the central issue there is, therefore, the definite danger of misrepresenting it. I have tried, accordingly, to interpret their accounts of the nature of historical knowledge within the context of their own intentions, as well as analysing their implications for the general philosophical issue with which this book is concerned. This has involved considerable textual explication and discussion which, apart from the question of its bearing upon the central question, will, I hope, be of interest in its own right.

An initial idea of the general problem can be most easily given by noting some connections between certain widely accepted features of historical knowledge. The first is that history is essentially a factual discipline. A fundamental aim of historical knowledge, that is to say, is to establish that certain people lived and died, that certain deeds were performed, that certain events took place and so on.[1] These are,

[1] This is meant only as a statement of what historians purport to do. A distinction must be drawn between what most historians say that they are doing and what philosophers say that analysis shows that they can possibly do. The distinction is captured excellently by Murray G. Murphey, in the opening sentences of his book, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), where he writes: 'Whatever their disagreements, historians as a group are agreed that history is a discipline which seeks to establish true statements about events which have occurred and objects which have existed in the past.' He then proceeds by pointing out that this claim, 'which seems so self-evident to historians', involves a number of ontological and epistemological problems, with which his book is concerned. Similarly, G. R. Elton, while disclaiming to have the expertise to enter into discussion of the philosophical problems to which it gives rise, defines history as being 'concerned with all those human sayings, thoughts, deeds and sufferings which occurred in the past and which have left present deposit; and it deals with them from the point of view of happening, change and the particular'. *The Practice of History*, The Fontana Library (London, Collins, 1969), p. 24. This does not mean, however, that all historians are satisfied that they can reach the truth. In the 1930s, for example, the American historian Charles Beard produced two essays, 'Written History as an Act of Faith' and 'That Noble Dream', in the *American Historical Review*, 39 (1934) and 41 (1935) respectively, in which he set out his reasons for believing that we could never reach an account of the past 'as it actually was'. For an analysis of Beard's arguments, see William Dray, *Perspectives on History* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), Chapter 2. Beard's distinguished compatriot, Carl L. Becker, expressed similar reservations in his essay, 'What Are Historical Facts?', in the *Western Political Quarterly*, 8 (1955). But the fact remains that historians normally claim that they are hoping to establish truths about the past, or at least about the

of course, not the only things with which historians are concerned. Apart from an interest in what actually happened, they are interested in explaining why such things happened, in the context within which they could happen and in the consequences of their happening. These other interests presuppose, however, that it is possible to establish, with a greater or lesser degree of security, further facts about what did or did not happen. For the distinction between, for example, an *explanans* and an *explanandum* does not normally depend upon anything intrinsic to the things brought forward as *explanans* or *explanandum*, but upon the point of view from which we are interested in the things in question. Thus something which is an *explanans* from one point of view – say, Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in relation to certain features of later sixteenth-century economic trends – may be an *explanandum* from another – say, changing patterns of religious belief in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. But no matter which is the focus of our interest, it will be satisfied only if further relevant facts can be established.

The second connected feature of historical knowledge is that it must be reached by valid argument based upon a body of relevant evidence. There has been considerable disagreement as to whether there is one form of argument typical of all historical reasoning or whether different forms of argument and evidence are required, dependent upon the type of history in which one is interested.[2] Despite this disagreement, however, there is almost universal agreement upon the need for some or other appropriate form of argument. For, unless this were so, in the absence of any direct or perceptual knowledge of the past, it would seem to be impossible to distinguish history from fiction. Thus, on this view, the factual character of historical knowledge is linked to the need for some adequate mode of *evidential* access to the past.

The third feature is that the evidence utilised in historical reasoning consists largely in human artefacts.[3] In many cases this might be in

human past, from some or other point of view the presence of which is not thought to preclude the possibility of their achieving their aim.

[2] For the best recent account of this debate, see C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), in which a wide range of different patterns of historical argument are discussed.

[3] See R. G. Collingwood's instructive comparison of the difference between the archaeologist's interpretation of a site, which depends crucially upon the fact that it is an artefact, and the work of the palaeontologist which, although it involves arranging fossils in a time-series, differs from that of the archaeologist. *The Idea of History* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1946; reprinted in Oxford Paperbacks, 1961), p. 212.

the form of documentary evidence, although a much larger range of kinds of documents than purely descriptive documents is involved. Moreover, as interest in the past has widened from largely political matters to include the social, economic and cultural dimensions of life, techniques have been developed to take into account a much wider range of artefacts. It is not even true, as a matter of fact, that the only relevant evidence consists in human artefacts, since the relationship between human activities and the physical environment can allow knowledge of past environments, reached on the basis of applied physical science, to act as a form of historical evidence. Nevertheless, useful though such evidence may be, it can never be more than a complement to the forms of evidence which past human artefacts comprise. For the fact that the physical environments in which human beings live may exert an influence upon the way in which they live does not remove the locus of the historian's interest from human beings to their physical context.

The overwhelming importance of the role of human artefacts in historical reasoning, however, gives rise to a further widely acknowledged feature: the need to interpret the artefacts in an appropriate way. If, for the sake of simplicity, we confine ourselves to the question of documentary evidence, it is clear that interpretation is required at a number of levels. Words, for example, differ in meaning according to the specific social context in which they are used and the purpose with which they are used. Beyond this, however, they may also change in meaning over time, according to the different historical contexts in which they are used. Thus a word which is used with a particular intention – say, to be insulting – may differ in meaning in one historical context from the same word used with the same intention in a different historical context. There is little point in making even a short list of the many well-known cases of the errors to which a failure to realise this have led. Documents of such importance as Constantine's Donation or Justinian's Code have depended for their influence upon such faults of historical interpretation.[4] Similarly, changes in the meaning of words such as 'whig' and 'tory' have

[4] For an excellent summary of the means whereby the incorrect interpretations of the Donation and of Justinian's Code were identified by Lorenzo Valla and the great French jurists, Budé, Cujas and Hotman, see B. A. Haddock, *An Introduction to Historical Thought* (London, Edward Arnold, 1980), Chapter 4.

affected historical accounts themselves, because of the possibility of misinterpretation.[5]

The need for an appropriate canon of interpretation for the language used in documentary evidence is, however, only one aspect of a general interpretative requirement. For language is used within a set of ongoing social and cultural practices, the changing content of which constitutes a continuing problem for the historian in justifying the interpretations of evidence upon which his conclusions about the past depend. Nevertheless, although language is used within this wider context of social practices, it remains our primary mode of access to knowledge of most of the specific events and occurrences which took place within them. That this is so can be seen by reflecting upon the differences between archaeological knowledge of pre-literate societies and historical knowledge of literate societies. In the former case, much can be discovered about the form of organisation of some society and of its level of technical sophistication, but hardly anything, and certainly little with any degree of specificity, about any individual deeds and actions which may have taken place within it. In the case of history, on the other hand, a great deal can be known about very detailed aspects of both larger- and smaller-scale events within an historical context, provided that some linguistic evidence is left. The problem of arriving at knowledge of *specific* facts about the activities of individuals and groups of individuals in their historical context thus presupposes a solution to that of interpreting language within the context of the changing set of social and historical practices within which it operates.

The most obvious way of meeting the difficulty of the correct interpretation of artefacts would seem to be by the utilisation of a reliable interpretative methodology. Here there are two alternatives: one is the adoption of a purely formal methodology, involving no assumptions about the general nature of the historical individuals or agents in whose activity we are interested or of the character of the society in which they inhere; the other is adoption of one which makes some such assumptions, presumably, in compliance with the principle of Occam's razor, the minimum number possible. On the face of it, the former procedure seems preferable since, in taking

[5] See Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953).

nothing for granted, it precludes no possible outcome. But, as I shall argue below,[6] this apparent virtue is a severe defect, since, in precluding no outcomes, it can neither preclude conclusions so bizarre that it would be more rational to abandon the methodology than to accept its consequences, nor produce any good reason why we should not prefer other conclusions which we may find less bizarre. A preference for the latter would, indeed, amount to recognition of the insufficiency of such a methodology. Some constraints, it seems, must therefore be introduced into the methodology, such as would be provided by the use of some limiting presuppositions.

It remains problematic, however, what these presuppositions should be and how they can be justified. If one considers the presuppositions which historians make, at least fairly close to the surface of their enquiries, the principal one appears to be that there is some degree of constancy in human nature. The people who figure in historians' accounts, individually or *en masse*, are, much like ourselves, endowed with motives and intentions, with the capacity to adjust their intentions in the light of the satisfaction of their motives in prevailing circumstances, and to translate those intentions into actions which, in many cases at least, can be seen as their successful implementation, and so on. But the nature of this constancy – in particular, whether it is purely formal, in the sense just mentioned, or whether it involves something more substantial – is more difficult to determine. For since historians are normally more interested in carrying out their investigations than in offering philosophical analyses of what these involve, they rarely offer an explicit account of the nature or justification of these more general presuppositions.[7]

Beyond this difficulty, however, lies another. If it is necessary to make some assumptions about human nature as part of the background to the interpretation and use of historical evidence, how should these be affected by the possibility that human nature may have changed over time? It hardly seems necessary, when considering this problem, to allow for the possibility that human nature, either formally or substantially, may have changed in its entirety. If there has been change of such a global nature, the historian will come

[6] See pp. 57–9 below.

[7] This is not to deny that in their actual research historians recognise both similarities in, and differences between, the behaviour of people in different historical cultures. But the fact remains that they show little interest in the theoretical foundations of their capacity to do so.

up against it as a limiting case, revealing itself in the fact that he will be unable to identify anything as an artefact and, hence, as even a putative piece of evidence about the human past. This would not commit him, of course, to denying that human beings may have evolved from other forms of life. But it would entail that a history of these earlier forms of life would not have the sort of intelligibility which we would expect to find in a human history involving even the minimum presuppositions about the formal character of human activity mentioned above.

The challenge presented by the possibility that *some* aspects of human nature may have changed over time cannot, however, be treated so lightly. The possibility here is not that there will be no artefacts which can be used as a basis for our knowledge of the past, but that we may not know how to interpret those that there are or, at least, that we may have no justification for the interpretative schema which we utilise. The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that theoretically there is an indefinite number of interpretative schemata of which we may avail ourselves, giving rise to an indefinite number of different possible accounts of the past. If we are to believe that the products of any one of these is true, we must have some reason for believing that one of these schemata is superior to its rivals in its capacity to ground historical truth.

In relation to this problem, different answers follow from different conceptions of the nature of the assumptions in question. If they are thought to be purely formal, it will become a matter of historical discovery whether or not the substantial content of human nature has changed over time. But then, given the difficulties about the justification of our interpretative schemata for any substantive conclusions we may reach about human nature, we shall have considerable difficulty in justifying our belief in the conclusions reached by our adoption of one schema rather than another. If, on the other hand, the assumptions are thought to be substantial, the historian will be committed in advance to a knowledge of some core of truths about the content of human nature, possibly involving a distinction between variant and invariant aspects, for which some theoretical justification will again be required.

Conceived in these terms, I shall argue, the problem is irresolvable. The demand for the assumption of formal constancy, I shall suggest, is necessary but insufficient. It needs supplementation by further knowledge of the sort which only a substantial theory of human

nature can provide. But no such theory is sustainable. Thus if knowledge of historical fact involves the satisfaction of the requirements which I have sketched above, it becomes impossible.

The answer is, plainly, to reconsider the requirements in a different way and, in particular, in a way which does not presuppose that our only access to the historical past is by means of historical argument. This would not mean that historical argument is not involved in the acquisition of historical knowledge, but it would mean that there could be no such knowledge if *argument* were our *only* mode of access to the past. If, as seems clear, historical argument has an important part to play in the production of historical knowledge, it can do so only if it is supported by a knowledge of the past derived from some other source. In the final chapter I shall try to explain and defend an account of how we might have such knowledge from a different source.

I have tried to advance towards this theory by critical interpretations of aspects of the theories of three thinkers who, for various reasons, have been sensitive to different aspects of this central problem. Since each of the three is both important and interesting in his own right, it might seem unnecessary to explain my particular choice. On the other hand, since there are many other philosophers whose work is also relevant to the main cluster of problems, it may be helpful to give my reasons for this choice.

The first is that all three philosophers were convinced of the importance of taking history seriously, partly as a problem in its own right but also because of its relevance to a philosophical understanding of human nature. In fact, as I shall argue, all three were convinced both of the need to ground historical knowledge upon a theory of human nature and also to provide such a theory on the basis of their general philosophical positions.

The second is that, as a result of the combination of their belief that historical knowledge requires a theory of human nature and of their different conceptions of philosophy, they had different conceptions of the way in which a relevant theory should be produced. Hence they arrived at three different kinds of theory which occupy, in a sense, key points on a spectrum of possible views sharing their basic assumption. At one end, Hume represents the case for thinking that a relevant theory of human nature must be empirical. At the other, Hegel is committed – or so I shall argue – to the view that it must be derived philosophically and, indeed, by a form of *a priori* reasoning.

Rather more in the centre, Vico maintains that the kind of theory in question is neither wholly empirical nor wholly philosophical, but requires a combination of empirical and philosophical elements in a mutually supportive relationship.

The third reason is that, despite what may look like, and from certain points of view are, fundamental differences between them, it is their shared assumption that historical knowledge must be *grounded* upon a theory of human nature which explains why, ultimately, the theories which they produced are incompatible with a satisfactory solution to the general philosophical problem which I have outlined above. For, given this assumption, the theory of human nature must itself be, in a certain sense, ahistorical, and such historical accounts as arise from it must share that ahistorical character. When this criticism is made explicit, and its consequences developed, the way is laid open for the different approach which I try to develop in the final chapter.

I have not chosen the three thinkers, however, simply because, as I hope to show, they make the same fundamental mistake. Their thought is much too rich for that. When the mistaken assumption is removed, there remains much of value in their views which, although I have not tried to chart it in detail, is compatible with the account which I offer in the final chapter.

Since the three philosophers are so different both in kind and in the way in which they have set out their thoughts about historical knowledge, I have treated them rather differently. It may be helpful, therefore, to outline briefly what I have tried to do in each case.

Chapter I investigates Hume's attempt to deal with two different considerations relevant to the general problem. The first is that of providing a distinction between historical fact and historical fiction. This is not the question whether we are justified in thinking that there was a past at all, although that is, I believe, problematic within the framework of Hume's philosophy. Leaving this question to one side, however, I have concentrated first upon Hume's explanation why, in relation to any specific belief about the past, we are entitled to believe that it is about a real past rather than an imaginary one. The answer which he offers is that the real past impinges causally upon the present in a way in which a fictitious past does not. In so doing, it provides material which, in conjunction with well-established causal rules, enables us to come to knowledge of the past on the basis of sound causal inferences. It will be evident that, in offering this

account of our knowledge of historical fact, Hume is subscribing to the general thesis that historical knowledge must be based upon sound historical reasoning. For various reasons, which I shall not here anticipate, the theory is rejected as insufficient as an account of historical reasoning.

This part of his theory, which is advanced in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, takes no account of the necessity to introduce principles of interpretation. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, however, Hume shows himself aware that there is a problem of interpretation. To deal with it he advances two constraining assumptions. The first is the well-known thesis of the constancy of human nature. The second is a thesis to which he gave no specific name but which, because of its similarity in character to the constancy of human nature, I have called 'the constancy of human consciousness'. Both of these theses are examined and rejected as inadequate to the task in hand, on the ground that the limitations which they impose upon the historian are so severe that they would preclude him from knowledge of any changes which may have taken place in human nature during its historical career. Despite this, however, in the course of the chapter I take the opportunity to explain why I think that a methodology which makes *no assumptions whatsoever* about the content of human nature, which I call 'epistemological neutralism', would not be preferable to one invoking those made by Hume. One of the main conclusions of the chapter is, therefore, that if historical reasoning is the basis of historical knowledge, it requires *some* assumptions about human nature, although those made by Hume are unacceptable.

In Chapter 2 I consider Hegel's account of the nature of historical knowledge, assuming that this is what he intends to offer in his account of 'philosophical history'. A particular reason for discussing him in this context is that his most detailed exposition of his theory, which is given in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, is explicitly offered in opposition to any theory which assumes that human nature has a content which is 'fixed and constant' and which is thought to apply to 'all men, past and present'. Hegel regards any such theory as mistaken and his own is intended as a corrective, supplying principles which explain how, and in what ways, the content of human nature does change. In this sense, it stands in direct contrast to Hume's.

Because of the obscurity of Hegel's mode of expression, I have spent

considerable time in this chapter in trying to present a clear, textually supportable, interpretation of his theory of historical knowledge. For this purpose, I have confined my exposition entirely to the Introduction of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, which, although it is Hegel's most detailed attempt to expound his view, is rarely the subject of a study in its own right. The conclusion which is reached is that his theory is preferable to Hume's in that it acknowledges the constitutive role of ideas in the content of human nature and does so in a way which relates social structure to subjective consciousness, while presenting historical change as a consequence of changes in certain fundamental constitutive ideas. But his account of the actual history of these changes is rejected on the ground that it cannot dispense with the restrictive idea that the changes which underlie the development of human nature, thus conceived, are determined *a priori*. As a result his theory, which *necessitates*, rather than permits, change in human nature, is just as constraining historically as Hume's.

Since Hume's and Hegel's accounts of the underlying conceptions of human nature are almost mirror images, the one imposing a constraining concept of constancy, the other an equally constraining concept of change, Chapter 3 examines Vico's attempt to establish an intermediate way in which to think of the concept of a human nature which may change over time, in relation to the problem of historical knowledge. What makes Vico interesting here is that the concept of human nature which he develops neither insists upon constancy as rigidly as Hume, nor imposes such a specific sequence of purely *rational* change on such an *a priori* basis as Hegel. The conception which he produces presents reason rather as a transformation of the imagination under the twin influences of a historically developing desire for individual self-preservation and an ever-increasing capacity to grasp the truth. He is, moreover, much more successful than either Hume or Hegel in showing how such a theory might be brought to bear upon the interpretation of evidence about the past. Nevertheless, it remains the case that he does so only by embodying this general philosophical conception in a *substantial* theory of historical development in which we are dealing not with the concept of a human nature which may have changed but with that of one which must change in a particular way. As a result, it becomes impossible for him to justify his preference for one substantial theory rather than some other, as a necessary presupposition of knowledge of historical fact.

One of the conclusions of these three chapters is that none of the three philosophers provides a satisfactory solution to the problem of historical fact because each, in his own way, constrains the historian's findings by a theory which is ahistorical, in the sense that it fails to understand the importance of the historian's own historical location in relation to the problem of knowledge of historical fact. A history written in accordance with their prescriptions would be a history written from a viewpoint external to history and by an historian who knew that human nature either must or cannot change in certain ways rather than by one for whom the question whether, and in what respect, it has changed is a factual matter.

Another conclusion, however, which seems to run counter to this, is that although, in order to interpret the evidence, the historian must assume that the past about which he writes was formally the same as the present, in the sense that it was inhabited by people who shared our formal capacities, this alone cannot provide sufficient support for his claim that the accounts which he produces on the basis of historical argument alone are accounts of historical fact. To justify the latter claim he needs some substantial knowledge of the past, rather of the sort which Hegel and Vico try to provide, but derived from some less ahistorical source. In the final chapter, therefore, I try to develop the outlines of an account, involving the concept of an historically acquired historical consciousness, which will show how this requirement can be met in respect both of specific historical actions and events and of the more general changes in conceptual schemes in the past which are reflected in changes in human nature.